

Ruth Gordon at 80: 'I Didn't Wind Up Lonely on the West Side'

By Richard L. Coe

Atop those spikey heels that add a bit to her five feet, Ruth Gordon sashayed around her Central Park South sitting room Monday looking forward to the busiest days of her 80 years.

Last night her native town of Quincy, Mass., was to salute her with the Ruth Gordon Birthday Ball. Tonight Quincy is to do it again with its Ruth Gordon Birthday Banquet. Individually, friends have chipped in a dollar for each of her 80 years toward the Ruth Gordon Theater of Quincy's Center for the Performing Arts.

"We'll take the noon train, myself and Garson (her husband Garson Kanin), a drawing room. The limo in Boston will take us right to the Ritz, one of my favorites in this world of wonderful hotels. When you keep busy like this, do it under comfortable conditions. I can order tea, a steak, what you will, at any hour.

"I go on Elliot Norton's 7:30 TV show, then rush back to the Ritz to see the TV bow of 'Look What Happened to Rosemary's Baby.' That's the sequel to 'Rosemary's Baby' and I have more of the part that brought me my Oscar. Then there's the ball on Saturday, the banquet Sunday.

"Mayor Joseph J. La Raia of Quincy looks exactly like Tyrone Power and I can never take my eyes off Mayor La Raia, so good to look at. Then, the following Tuesday, that's a day. Do the ABC 'Good Morning, America' at 7:30, be there by 6. Harper and Row give a wonderful lunch for my book—650 to autograph before then—and that night Arnold (theatrical lawyer Weissberger) and Milton (theatrical agent Goldman) give me one of their bang-up parties.

"I can hardly believe it. In the Quincy City Hall they have the birth certificate on display—Ruth Gordon Jones, Oct. 30, 1896. That's me.

"And this absolutely slays me. Lynn (Fontanne) read all 500 pages of my book to Alfred (Lunt). Can you just hear Lynn's marvelous voice reading all my words? Well, I've told them Garson and I will be in Milwaukee on May 3 and that we're getting a limo to drive out to Genesee Depot May 4 and whether they're there or not, we will be.

"Next summer I'm gonna take three months off, June, July and August, and be ready to bring 'Ho-Ho-Ho' into the Kennedy Center, I hope, then Boston and New York. That's the comedy I've been writing the past couple of years and played this summer on the

Cape and they screamed and roared, and Joey Faye, who's going into Alex Cohen's 'Hellzapoppin' has a two-week out clause so he can come back to 'Ho-Ho-Ho' when we do it next fall.

"This summer I made a movie in June, another one in July and then opened the play in August.

"Well, then in September the book came out and I did a raft of talk shows and suddenly wound up in the hospital. My doctor told me to slow down and I took six weeks off to get ready for Quincy—and be sure you pronounce it *Quinzey*—but I'm all right again now and I'm going to take Pavlov's advice—you know, the Russian doctor with the dog who rang a bell when he was hungry?—Pavlov took three months off every year and that's what I'm going to do now that I'm 80.

"People ask what I'm going to wear to the ball. Well, of course it's the pink satin Givenchy I wore when I got my Oscar and they say, 'Well, surely not, that's eight years old,' and I say 'Givenchy, if you're lucky enough to have one, which I am, well, it's good until it falls apart.'

"Then, in December, CBS is going to show 'The Prince of Central Park.' It's about two children and a West Side lady, lonely people all, and a lovely thing, sort of a modern Peter Pan. I could have been like that lady I play, except that I didn't wind up lonely on the West Side."

No, Ruth Gordon didn't wind up lonely, and she saw to it that generally her address was on the East Side. When she wasn't sure when her next dime was coming in, she spent dollars, the Waldorf, Vuitton luggage, pink blotting paper, red Hermes, Cartier's, Van Cleef and Arpels, Claridge's, the Beverly Hills, the Huntington, the Sante Fe Super Chief, the Twentieth Century, Montecatini. In her new autobiography, "My Side" (published by Harper and Row, \$12.95), everything tumbles out as it did in "Myself Among Others," only this time it's more Gordon and in no chronological or sequential order.

"Do you care about sequence? Not me. We don't think in sequence, we rarely talk in sequence, we don't rehearse a play in sequence so why shoot a script that way? When I get it I learn it. Maybe everybody does, maybe nobody does, maybe it's wrong but if it is, don't tell me. I don't like to be told things. In the beginning I knew I could learn if anybody'd teach me and they did. I can still learn, but not from telling me."

She was a proper Episcopal girl. Her

sea captain father wanted her to become a physical culture teacher. Her mother said: "Be a nurse." "Be a secretary." "Be a wife." "Be a lady." After seeing Hazel Dawn in "The Pink Lady" in Boston's still active Colonial Theater, Gordon's voices told her, "Go on the stage. Be an actress."

Her folks floated her for training at New York's American Academy of Dramatic Arts, where they chucked her out with the advice she'd never make it as an actress. She got a part—Nibs in Maude Adams' revival of "Peter Pan," in December 1915. She toured third and fourth companies, but always the leads. She went to a hospital to have both her legs broken so she'd have better-looking pins. She had to settle for Humphrey Bogart as leading man when it came to touring her first solo hit, "Saturday's Children." Thanks to Helen Hayes, she wound up playing a "The Country Wife" at London's Old Vic with Edith Evans.

In Owen Davis's dramatization of Edith Wharton's "Ethan Frome," with its Down East snow settings, she had a great curtain line: "Ethan, we're going down that hill so we'll never come up again. Right into that big elm down there so we never have to leave each other." When she was playing Washington's National with Katharine Cornell in "The Three Sisters," the company spent the break between matinee and evening at the Willard Hotel watching her marry a writer 14 years younger than herself. Justice and Mrs. Felix Frankfurter were on hand. That was 34 years ago and she and Garson Kanin are still married.

Gordon wasn't necessarily hooked on marriage. She did marry Gregory Kelly, a handsome leading man of the '20s, who died of heart trouble at 32. But she did not marry producer-director Jed Harris, though she had a son by him. She took off for Paris to keep Jones Kelly a secret from her gossip friends. Years later when Jones married a Vanderbilt, she abducted Thornton Wilder and his sister Isabelle from Connecticut to witness the Gotham wedding, because Wilder had been a cheering friend in bleak times.

Wilder wrote one of her dazzling parts, but initially it wasn't for her. Jane Cowl got it, "The Merchant of Yonkers," which bombed. Thornton rewrote it and years later, in London, Gordon became Dolly Gallagher Levi in "The Matchmaker" and kept playing it for four years all over the map. With 70 in sight, Gordon took singing lessons, aiming to play what she knew



*Ruth Gordon:
"I don't like
to be told things.
In the beginning
I knew I could
learn if
anybody would
teach me,
and they did.
I can still
learn, but not
from telling me."*

Photo by Peter Simon,
from "My Side"

would someday be a musicalized Dolly. She didn't get it. Carol Channing did.

Those were only two of scores of disappointments. In the early days she missed parts because she was an unknown. There'd be other good parts she'd miss because she had turned them down. What do you do when everything goes wrong? What about days when nothing seems right? In "My Side" she advises:

"Try thinking over your six worst. Would you change today for one of those? If the answer is yes, that's trouble, but remember you lived through six. If the answer is no, appreciate it and think of your six best. Maybe you're due for a seventh." In "Harold and Maude," Ruth's old lady took a suicide pill because that was her way of ending a joyful life. Wrong, says Ruth:

"I believe in God, Jesus, life eternal, luck, my voices, myself. Pan me, don't give me the part, publish everybody's book but this one and I will still make it. Why? Because I believe I will. If you believe, then you hang on. If you believe, it means you've got imagination, you don't face facts—what can stop you? If I don't make it today, I'll come in tomorrow."

At 45 Ruth's new husband was in the Army and there were no parts in sight.

She wrote a play for herself, working on it in a 16th Street apartment here while Kanin worked days at the Pentagon. It was about a celebrity whose husband was trying to pass his officers' training course. She called it "Over 21" and it was a walloping hit of World War II, which meant that Gordon got paid both as playwright and star.

She got to thinking about her girlhood in the Wollaston section of Quincy and wrote a comedy called "Years Ago." The war over, she took to writing screen plays with Kanin: "A Double Life," "Adam's Rib," "The Marrying Kind," "Pat and Mike" and "The Actress," all hits. There were flops, but "Draw the Veil." That's the way it's been and is with Gordon and Kanin:

"Don't be helpless, don't give up, don't kill yourself, don't look for trouble, stuff gets in your way, kick it under the rug; stay well, stay with it, make it come out . . .

"It's been great, it's been hell, it's been short, it's been mean, it's been fair, it's been endless, it's been tough, it's been lucky, it's been selfish, it's been like Papa's charts in his closet that showed the latitude, the longitude, the coastline, the height of the

mountains, the borders of countries but not the countries themselves.

"It's been a ball, it's been sad, it's been lonely, it's been hard work, it's come out right. I live in the past and the present and the future and haven't let them get me down, and I wouldn't want to live anywhere else."

There is a sequence in this Niagara of big names and fancy places and luxury conveniences. It's cannily disguised. She's talking with Bud Cort on the set of "Harold and Maude" and suddenly she's also talking, years earlier, with W. Somerset Maugham, who'd asked:

"Ruth, have you a savings account?"

"No, but I will tomorrow."

"Have a savings account and keep a journal. Everyone goes out of fashion, dear. Even as successful a playwright as Pinero. I talked to him at the Garrick Club late on in his life. 'They don't want me any more,' he said."

"Ever notice how many people have a bad third act?" asked Kanin.

Gordon's having a great third act, couldn't have been better if she'd written it herself. But she did write it herself. "My Side" sets forth, as though Gordon were piercing at you herself, exactly how to succeed by really trying: "Never, never, never give up."